Agatha Christie

THE ISLAND

A SHORT STORY

The Island

A Short Story

Agatha Christie

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The Island

There were hardly any trees on the island. It was arid land, an island of rock, and the goats could find little to eat. The shapes of the rocks were beautiful as they swept up from the sea, and their colour changed with the changing of the light, going from rose to apricot, to pale misty grey, deepening to mauve and to stern purple, and in a last fierceness to orange, as the sun sank into that sea so rightly called wine-dark. In the early mornings the sky was a pale proud blue, and seemed so high up and so far away that it filled one with awe to look up at it.

But the women of the island did not look up at it often, unless they were anxiously gazing for signs of a storm. They were women and they had to work. Since food was scarce, they worked hard and unceasingly, so that they and their children should live. The men went out daily in the fishing boats. The children herded the goats and played little games of their own with pebbles in the sun.

Today the women with great jars of fresh water on their heads, toiled up the slope from the spring in the cleft of the cliff, to the village above.

Mary was still strong, but she was not as young as most of the women, and it was an effort to her to keep pace with them.

Today the women were very gay, for in a few days' time there was to be a wedding. The girl children danced round their elders and chanted monotonously:

"I shall go to the wedding … I shall go to the wedding … I shall have a ribbon in my hair … I shall eat roseleaf jelly … roseleaf jelly in a spoon …"

The mothers laughed, and one child's mother said teasingly: "How do you know I shall take you to the wedding?"

Dismayed, the child stared.

"You *will* take me—you will—you *will* …" And she clung to Mary, demanding: "She will let me go to the wedding? Say she will!"

And Mary smiled and said gently: "I think she will, sweetheart!"

And all the women laughed gaily, for today they were all happy and excited because of the wedding.

“Have you ever been to a wedding, Mary?” the child asked.

“She went to her own,” laughed one of the women.

“I didn’t mean your own. I meant a wedding party, with dancing and sweet things to eat, and roseleaf jam, and honey?”

“Yes. I have been to weddings.” Mary smiled, “I remember one wedding … very well … a long time ago.”

“With roseleaf jam?”

“I think so—yes. And there was wine …”

Her voice trailed off as she remembered.

“And when the wine runs out, we have to drink water,” one of the women said. “That always happens!”

“We did not drink water at this wedding!”

Mary’s voice was strong and proud.

The other women looked at her. They knew that Mary had come here with her son from a long way away, and that she did not often speak of her life in earlier days, and that there was some very good reason for that. They were careful not to ask her questions, but of course there were rumours, and now suddenly one of the older children piped up and spoke like a parrot.

“They say you had a son who was a great criminal and was executed for his crimes. Is that true?”

The women tried to hush her down, but Mary spoke, her eyes looking straight ahead of her.

“Those that should know said he was a criminal.”

“But you didn’t think so?” the child persisted.

Mary said after a pause:

“I do not know of myself what is right or wrong. I am too ignorant. My son loved people—good and bad equally …”

They had reached the village now and they divided to go to their own homes. Mary had farthest to go, to a stone croft at the very end of the cluster of sprawling buildings.

“How is your son? Well, I hope?” asked one of the women politely.

“He is well, thanks be to God.”

To erase the memory of what had been said before, the woman said kindly:

“You must be proud of this son of yours. We all know that he is a Holy Man. They say he has visions and walks with God.”

“He is a good son,” said Mary. “And, as you say, a very Holy Man.”

She left them to go her own way and they stood looking after her for a moment or two.

“She is a good woman.”

“Yes. It is not her fault, I am sure, that her other son went wrong.”

“Such things happen. One does not know why. But she is lucky in this son. There are times when he is animated by the Spirit, and then he prophesies in a loud voice. His feet, they say, rise off the ground—and then he lies like one dead for a while.”

They all nodded and clucked in wonder and pleasure to have such a holy man amongst them.

Mary went to the little stone cottage, and stood the jar of water down. She glanced towards where a man sat at a rudely fashioned table. There was a scroll of parchment in front of him and he bent over it, writing with a pen, pausing now and then, whilst his eyes half closed, as he lost himself in the ardours of the spirit …

Mary was careful not to disturb him. She busied herself in getting together the midday meal.

The man was a man of great beauty, though no longer young. He had great delicacy of feature, and the far-away eyes of a soul to whom spiritual life is as real as the life of the body. Presently his hand slackened on the pen, and he seemed almost to pass into a trance, neither moving nor speaking, and indeed hardly breathing.

Mary put the dishes on the table.

“Your meal is ready, my son.”

As one who hears a faint sound from very far away, he shook his head impatiently.

“The vision … so near …” he muttered, “so near … When—oh when?”

“Come, my son, eat.”

He waved the food away.

“There is another hunger, another thirst! The food of the spirit … The thirst for righteousness …”

“But you must eat. To please me. To please your mother.”

Gently she coaxed and scolded—and at last he came down from that high exaltation, and smiled at her with a human half-teasing look.

“Must I then eat to satisfy you?”

“Yes. Or else I shall be made unhappy.”

So he ate to please her, hardly noticing what the food was.

Then he bethought himself to ask:

“How is it with you, dear mother? You have all you need?”

“I have all I need,” said Mary.

He nodded, satisfied, and took up his pen once more.

When Mary had cleared all away, she went out and stood looking out over the sea.

Her hands clasped together, she bowed her head and spoke softly under her breath.

“Have I done all I could? I am such an ignorant woman. I do not always know how to serve and minister to one who is assuredly a Saint of God. I wash his linen, and prepare his food, and bring him fresh water, and wash his feet. But more than that I know not how to do.”

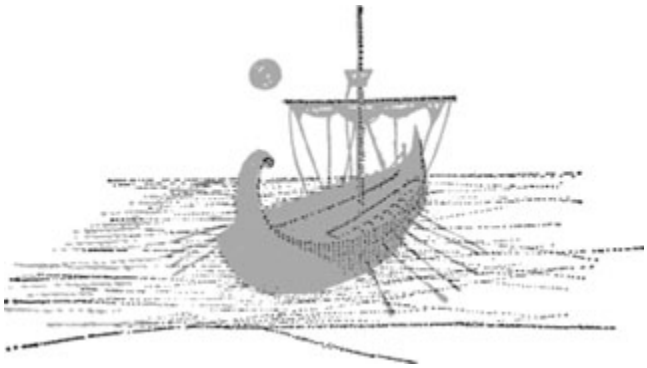
As she stood there, her anxiety passed. Serenity came back to her worn face.

On the shore beneath, a boat had drawn into the little stone pier. It was not an ordinary fishing boat, but one that stood high in the water, and had a big curving prow of richly carved wood. Two men landed from it, and some old men who were mending fishing nets came to accost the strangers.

Politely the two men made known their business.

“We seek amongst the islands hereabouts for an island on which is said to dwell the Queen of Heaven.”

The old fishermen shook their heads.



“What you seek is certainly not here. We have no shrine such as you describe.”

“Perhaps your women have knowledge of such a shrine?” one of the strangers suggested. “Women are often secretive about such matters.”

“Inquire if you wish. One of us will go up and show you the village.”

The strangers went up with their guide. The women came clustering out of their houses. They were excited and interested, but they all shook their heads.

“No Goddess has her Shrine here, alas! Neither by our Spring nor elsewhere.”

They told him of other shrines reported from other places, but none of them were what the strangers sought.

“But we have a Holy Man here,” said one of the women proudly. He is skin and bone, and fasts all the time when his old mother will let him.”

But the strangers were not looking for a Holy Man however great his sanctity.

“At least inquire of him,” one of the women insisted. “He might know of such a thing as you seek.”

So they went to the Holy Man’s croft; but he was lost in his Vision and for some time did not even hear what they were saying to him.

Then he was angry and said:

“Do not go astray after heathen Goddesses. Not after the Scarlet Woman of Babylon, nor after the Abominations of the Phoenicians. There is only one Redeemer, and that is the Living Son of God.”

So the strangers went away, but the Holy Man’s mother ran secretly after them.

“Do not be angry,” she begged. “My son was not meaning to be discourteous to you; but he is so pure and so holy himself that he lives in a region far above this earth. He is a good man and a good son to me.”

The strangers spoke kindly to her.

“We are not offended. You are a good woman, and have a good son.”

“I am a very ordinary woman,” she said. “But I must tell you that you should not believe in all these Aphrodites and Astartes and whatever their heathen names are. There is only one God, our Father in Heaven.”

“You say you are only an ordinary woman,” said the older of the two strangers. “But although your face is old and ravaged with the lines of

sorrow, yet to my mind you have a face of great beauty—and I in my time was apprenticed to a great sculptor, so I know what beauty is."

Mary, amazed, cried out: "Once, perhaps, when I wove the coloured tapestry in the Temple, or when I poured my husband's wine in the shop, and held my first-born son in my arms. But *now*!"

But the old sculptor shook his head.

"Beauty lies beneath the skin," he insisted. "In the bone. Yes, and beneath that again—in the heart. So I say that you are a beautiful woman, perhaps more beautiful now than you were as a young girl. Farewell—and may you be blessed."

So the strangers rowed away in their boat, and Mary went slowly back to the croft and to her son.

The coming of the strangers had made him restless. He was walking up and down and his hands clasped his head in suffering.

Mary ran to him and held him in her arms.

"What is it, dear son?"

He groaned out: "The spirit has gone out of me … I am empty … empty … I am cut off from God—from the joy of his Presence."

Then she comforted him—as she had comforted him many times before, saying: "From time to time, this has to be—we do not know why. It is like the wave of the sea. It goes out from the shore, but it returns, my son, it returns."

But he cried out:

"You do not *know*. You cannot understand … You do not know what it is to be caught up in the Spirit, to be exalted with the great glory of God!"

And Mary said humbly:

"That is true. *That*, I have not felt. For me, there has been only memory …"

"Memory is not enough!"

But Mary said fiercely: "It is enough for me!"

And she went to the door and stood there, looking out over the sea where the strangers had gone away …

As she stood there, she felt a strange expectancy rising in her; a fluttering hopeful joy. Almost, she went down to the shore again, but she restrained herself, for she knew that her son would soon need her. And so it was. He began to shake all over, and his body jerked, and at last his limbs

stiffened and he fell to the ground and lay like one dead. Then she covered him over for warmth and placed a fold of the cloak between his lips, in case the convulsions should come back. But he lay there motionless, and there was no sign, even, that he breathed.

Mary knew from experience that he would not stir for many hours, and she walked out again on to the hillside. It was growing dark now and the moon was rising over the sea.

Mary stood there savouring the welcome coolness of the evening. Her mind was full of memories of the past, of a hurried flight into Egypt, of the carpenter's shop, and of a marriage in Cana …

And again that joyous expectancy rose in her.

"Perhaps," she thought," perhaps at last the time has come."

Presently, very slowly, she began to walk down to the sea …

The moon rose in the sky, and it made a silvery path across the water, and as the light grew stronger, Mary saw a boat approaching.

She thought: "The strangers are coming back again …"

But it was not the strangers … She could see now that it was not the handsome carved boat of the strangers. This was a rough fishing boat—the kind of boat that had been familiar to her all her life …

And then she knew—quite certainly … It was *his* boat and he had come for her at last …

And now she ran, slipping and stumbling over the rough stones of the beach. And as she reached the water's edge, half sobbing and half panting, she saw one of the three men step out of the boat onto the sea and walk along the moonlit path towards her.

Nearer and nearer he came … and then—and then … she was clasped in his arms … Words poured from her, incoherently, trying to tell so much.

"I have done as you asked me—I have looked after John—He has been as a son to me. I am not clever—I cannot always understand his high thoughts and his visions, but I have made him good food, and washed his feet, and tended him and loved him … I have been his mother and he has been my son …?"

She looked anxiously up into his face, asking him a question.

"You have done all I asked you," he said gently. "Now—you are coming home with me."

"But how shall I get to the boat?"

“We will walk together on the water.”

She peered out to sea.

“Are those—yes, they are—Simon and Andrew, are they not?”

“Yes, they wanted to come.”

“How happy—Oh! how happy we are going to be,” cried Mary. “Do you remember the day of the marriage in Cana …?”

And so, walking together on the water, she poured out to her son all the little events and happenings of her life, and even how two strangers had come that very day looking for the “Queen of Heaven.” And how ridiculous it was!

“They were quite right,” said her Son. “The Queen of Heaven was here on the island, but they did not know her when they saw her …”

And he looked into the worn, ravaged, beautiful face of his mother, and repeated softly:

“No, they did not know her when they saw her!”

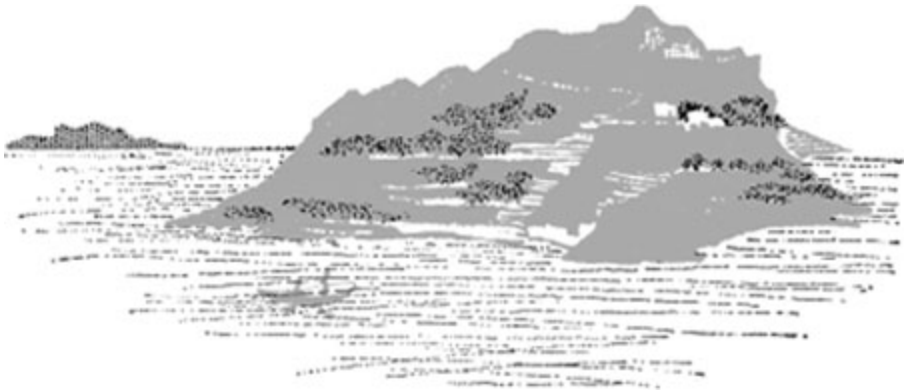
In the morning, John awoke and rose from the ground.

It was the Lord’s Day, and at once he knew that this was to be the great day of his life!

The Spirit rushed into him …

He took up his pen and wrote:

I saw a new heaven and a new earth … And behind me I heard a great voice as of a trumpet … Saying:



I am Alpha and Omega, the first and the last … I am he that liveth and was dead; and behold, I am alive for evermore, Amen; and have the keys of hell

and of death … Behold, I come quickly; and my reward is with me, to give every man according as his work shall be …

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About the Author

AGATHA CHRISTIE is the most widely published author of all time, outsold only by the Bible and Shakespeare. Her books have sold more than a billion copies in English and another billion in a hundred foreign languages. She died in 1976.

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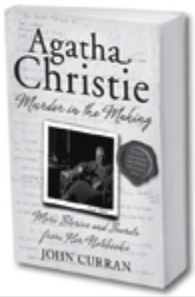

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